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SUBJECT: RESTRICTIONS ON FOREIGNERS IN NORTH OSSETIA

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Kirk Augustine.
Reason 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On March 21 the Russian Government issued a decree that puts most of the Republic of North Ossetia off-limits to foreigners. Local authorities began enforcing the decree this month, with immediate effects on international assistance organizations. Most local observers relate the Federal decree to increased tensions with Georgia. Local authorities, however, appear most eager to exclude assistance workers from the Prigorodnyy district, where tensions have been rising between ethnic Ossetians and Ingush IDPs. Local authorities also claim the existence of a "zone of counter-terrorist operations" banning Russian citizens as well as foreigners. End Summary.

The Legal Background

¶2. (U) Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Government of Russia took steps to re-impose Soviet-era bans on travel by foreigners to areas that were sensitive, mostly for military reasons. Decree No. 470 of July 4, 1992 restricts foreigners from traveling to specific parts of Siberia housing nuclear research facilities, parts of the Russian Far East and Far North where military units were deployed, certain parts of Kaliningrad and even parts of Moscow district. The decree has been amended a number of times since its inception.

¶3. (U) On March 21 PM Fradkov signed Decree No. 155 of 2006, the operative paragraph of which adds to the list of off-limits regions as follows:

Begin text of informal Embassy translation:

(Paragraph) 19. The Republic of North Ossetia-Alania (with the exception of the Vladikavkaz Airport (Beslan) and the cities of Vladikavkaz, Beslan, Alagir, and Ardon). Transit travel is permitted on the automobile routes Nazran-Beslan-Nalchik (Autoroute M-29), Verkhnyy Lars-Vladikavkaz (Automobile Road A-301), Nizhniy Zaramag-Alagir (Automobile Road R-297), Alagir-Ardon-Autoroute M-29 (Automobile Road R-298); on automobile roads connecting Vladikavkaz with Autoroute M-29 and the automobile road connecting Vladikavkaz Airport (Beslan) with Autoroute M-29; and on the railroads Nazran-Beslan-Murtazovo, Vladikavkaz-Beslan, Alagir-Elkhotovo, and Gudermes-Mozdok-Prokhladnoye.

End text.

Decree 155 instructs the Russian MFA to transmit this text to diplomatic missions in Moscow. The MFA did so only on June 15 via Note no. 3295. Local authorities in North Ossetia signaled to international organizations based in Vladikavkaz that they would begin enforcing the travel ban in June. No procedures were made available to request authorization to

travel to off-limits areas.

Federal Focus on Georgia...

¶4. (C) Local and international observers to whom we have spoken in the Caucasus and in Moscow can think of only one reason for Russia's Federal Government to impose such restrictions: tensions with Georgia. The order was signed two days after imposition of a politically-motivated ban on the import of Georgian wine. It came after numerous occasions when UN international employees, hiking in the Caucasus Mountains (along with North Ossetian EmerCom officials), ran into Russian military forces (as opposed to border guards). Each time, the soldiers demanded that the hikers return to Vladikavkaz, despite their official escorts.

¶5. (S) Restrictions on the presence of foreigners could potentially help disguise military movements to the Georgian border and/or into South Ossetia. The large Russian military base at Mozdok is off-limits to foreigners, as are all automobile roads leading to it. The road from Vladikavkaz to the Roki Tunnel border with South Ossetia is open to transit by foreigners as far south as Zaramag, but in fact there are no destinations along that road permitted to foreigners south of Alagir. The theory that the restrictions are designed to disguise military movements is consistent with reports, from OSCE observation and through other channels, that new heavy weaponry is appearing in South Ossetia. The Georgian Ambassador told us June 15 that in his view, based on the June 13 meeting he attended between Presidents Putin and Saakashvili, the Russians sincerely believe that the Georgians are preparing for military action in South Ossetia.

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He sensed that the Russians were confident of their readiness to meet any such contingency. (Note: Russian officials have often told us -- and said publicly -- that Moscow takes seriously its "obligation" to protect Russian citizens. Most inhabitants of South Ossetia now hold Russian passports. End Note.)

...But Local Authorities Target Prigorodnyy

¶6. (C) There have been two known incidents in which the travel ban has been enforced, and both were related to South Ossetia's tense Prigorodnyy District. On June 6 a UN convoy was turned back at the North Ossetian border as it tried to enter from Ingushetia along a "non-approved" route -- the route the UN had been using for ten years. The route, the most direct road from Nazran to Vladikavkaz, passes through Prigorodnyy. The approved route enters North Ossetia further to the north and heads to Beslan (from where another approved route leads south to Vladikavkaz), constituting a detour that skirts most the Prigorodnyy district.

¶7. (C) During the week of June 12, the North Ossetian FSB began to ban from the Prigorodnyy district Russian citizens working for NGOs partnered with foreign assistance organizations, including those implementing a USAID-funded project. They cited a hitherto unknown rule that Prigorodnyy was part of a "zone of counter-terrorist operations" which demanded special local (in addition to federal) registration of NGOs. Attempts by international assistance NGOs to meet with North Ossetian officials on the issue have been rebuffed.

¶8. (C) Background: Prigorodnyy was originally part of Ingushetia. When Stalin deported the Ingush to Central Asia in 1944, Ossetia took it over and Ossetians occupied houses left by the Ingush. When the Ingush were "rehabilitated" and permitted to return in 1956, Ossetia held on to the district -- and Ossetians remained in the former Ingush homes. Rising tensions led to a brief war in 1992. Though several thousand Ingush live in Prigorodnyy, none have reclaimed their homes.

Recently President Putin ordered the North Ossetian Government to resolve the issue of Mayskiy, where Ingush IDPs have been living in tents since 1992. The North Ossetian authorities picked up the tents, transported the people to a field two kilometers distant, put them back in the tents, and declared that they had fulfilled Putin's order. Tensions between Ingush and Ossetians have been growing since then. It was in Mayskiy that the North Ossetian authorities began banning the work of local NGOs.

Comment

¶9. (C) The restrictions will have a serious impact on assistance organizations. Though North Ossetia is the least vulnerable of the North Caucasus republics, it has attracted an inordinate amount of assistance. That appears to be the result of most aid organizations having their regional headquarters there, as well as from the outpouring of sympathy in the wake of the Beslan tragedy. Some international assistance projects appear to gratify local sentiment in support of South Ossetian separatists -- e.g., economic assistance to Ossetian refugees who fled Georgia in ¶1992. The area in which assistance inside North Ossetia is clearly necessary is to lower tensions in Prigorodnyy -- the one place from which local authorities are insistently banning international NGOs and their local partners.

¶10. (C) Even more serious, however, is what this move could mean for Russian-Georgian relations. It comes amid rising tensions across the board over the last few months, especially over South Ossetia. It also comes amid rumors heard throughout the assistance community in North Ossetia that the GOR is building refugee camps there to house a new wave of refugees expected from South Ossetia. Russians cite the deployment of Georgia's largest U.S.-trained unit to Gori and the construction of a new military hospital there as evidence of Georgian intentions. The moves Russia is making to counter these perceived Georgian intentions will lead in turn to increased Georgian suspicion of Russia's intentions. Expected Georgian parliamentary action on Russia's PKO in South Ossetia will only add to this cycle of distrust.

BURNS